

## **Side Trip, Part II**

By Michael A. Stackpole; Illustrations by Liz Danforth

Corran Horn's feeling that something was wrong got a big boost from his first glimpse of the *Hopskip*. The freighter looked as if someone had taken a stock Corellian YT-1300, split the disk along a line running from bow to stern, flopped one half on top of the other, then patched it together with whatever scrap metal was conveniently at hand. Corran had seen uglier ships, but none that were supposed to be operational.

He waited for Riiij to close the gateway to the hangar bay before he made a comment. "I guess smuggling doesn't pay what it once used to?"

Maranne's hard eyes flashed angrily. "We're traders, not smugglers."

Corran raised his hands. "Call it what you want. With Imp rules and regs out there, what starts as a trading trip could end up as a smuggling run."

Surprise played through Maranne's dark blue eyes, then she turned away and scratched at the back of her neck. "I'll get the landspeeder." Her surprise at his comment made her statement come a bit too fast, and Corran thought perhaps he caught a hint of fear in her words.

*Definitely more here than meets the eye.* The second he saw the ship, Corran abandoned any suspicion that these people were hard-edged smugglers coming to deliver supplies to Borbor Crisk. The things Crisk needed to wage his little war with Zekka Thyne and Black Sun for supremacy in the Corellian underworld weren't the sorts of things that would be entrusted to the crew of the *Hopskip*. *Actually, for Crisk to depose Thyne would require a Star Destroyer, which this ship isn't, and a legion of stormtroopers, which isn't hidden here.*

Corran saw Maranne disappear through a hatch in the freighter, so he turned his attention to Riiij. "Shipping with her can't be too rough. She's pretty easy on the eyes. Known her long?"

The slender man shook his head, then ran a hand across his short, spiky white hair. "Just along for the ride. If I do some work, I get some pay by the time we reach our destination." Riiij smiled carefully. "You been working with your partner long?"

"Off and on." Corran shrugged. Riiij's quick questioning of Corran about his background played to most people's tendency to want to talk about themselves. *It's a technique you learn to exploit when fishing for information from suspects. Either Riiij has had training, is very private, or both.* "Known him for a long time, but started running together recently. Bonded through bad times, you know? Like you and the Tunroth."

"You recognize him as a Tunroth?"

"Hal and me, we might be locals, but that doesn't mean we've not been around." Corran took a step back as Maranne lowered the rear loading ramp on the *Hopskip*. "He got a life debt toward you or something?"

"Life debt is a Wookiee thing." Riiij frowned, then started up the ramp to the freighter's hold. "Rathe and I are just traveling on the same ship. No connection beyond that."

"Got it." Corran kept an easy smile on his face while cataloguing the information Riiij had just supplied him. Corran knew life debts were a matter of Wookiee honor, but he only knew of them because of the Imperial warrants and advisories



about Han Solo and the Wookiee working with him. *Most folks don't know Wookiees exist or, at best, know Imps use them for slave labor. Folks who know more about Wookiees are usually Rebel sympathizers.*

He followed Rijj up the ramp and started looking around for clues to what the *Hopskip's* crew was doing in Coronet City. As a member of the Corellian Security Force, Corran had access to most information about the Rebellion and its connections to Corellia. *At least I have it when that worthless Imp Intelligence liaison officer isn't around.* While it was true that two of the Alliance's heroes were from Corellia, the Emperor's tightening of his grip on Corellia and the placement of forces on the world had kept the Rebel presence down. Corran knew there were Rebel cells in residence, and he'd gladly have run any of them in, but he didn't see them being so bold or so desperate to try to hook up with Crisk.

Corran slid past the battered nose of the old landspeeder -- like the ship, it looked as if it had been cobbled together from parts. It only had two seats, like a fancy speeder, but had a flat bed grafted on to the back. Except where dents let silvery metal show through, an even, dirt-brown coat of primer covered the vehicle. *Not fast, not strong, but beats hauling this stuff on my back.*

The bank of boxes that Maranne and Rijj were freeing from cargo-net tie-downs immediately attracted his attention. They were uniform in size and non-descript, but that struck Corran as odd. All of them had exteriors formed out of green duraplast that was a couple shades darker than his eyes, yet none of the rectangular boxes bore the streaking and scarring common on duraplast boxes. None had holographic tags, scuff marks or other signs of use, yet all had been bound with duraplast cables and fixed with a holographic seal.

As he lifted the first one from the top of the pile he felt nothing shift inside the boxes, nor was there a need for him to locate the box's balance point. He shook his head. "Where did you guys get sleight boxes?"

Maranne and Rijj both stopped as Corran set his box down on the landspeeder's bed. The woman frowned. "What's a *sleight* box?"

"If you don't know what a *sleight* box is, maybe you aren't smugglers." Corran tapped a finger on the top of his box. "It looks ordinary, but it has a low-power repulsorlift coil matrix and power supply built into the casing. It neutralizes the weight of whatever is inside. These boxes could be full of thermal detonators or air, and we'd never know. Smugglers developed them to trick customs officials, but most customs-droids know what to scan for now."

Maranne set her box down next to his. "Interesting story. Seems you've done more smuggling than we have."

"Maybe, or maybe I just know more about smuggling than you do." Corran gave her a sly smile. "For example, I know no one smuggles a cargo that's made up of unknown items. What's in these things?"

The woman shook her head, her dark blond queue lashing her from shoulder to shoulder. "Don't know. Don't want to know."

"I find that hard to believe." Corran frowned at her. "I don't know what kind of game you're running here, but these *sleight* boxes won't fool CorSec's droids. If this is stuff being hauled for the Rebels, they'll find it and you'll be in serious trouble."

Rijj slid his box onto the flat bed. "If we were Rebels and we knew what was in these boxes *and* it was meant for the Rebels, we'd be a lot more worried about the Empire than we would their puppets here on Corellia."

"You think CorSec's people are Imperial puppets?" Corran flicked that suggestion away with a wave of his hand. "CorSec's concerned with the integrity of the Corellian system, nothing more. If they tolerate Rebels here, the Imperial presence increases. Who wants that?"

Rijj's brown eyes flashed dangerously. "What you're telling me is that CorSec's people are willing to repress the enemies of a vicious regime so they don't get Vader's boot across their own necks. If I was a Rebel, I'd find it very difficult to tell the difference between CorSec agents and the Imps."

Corran forced himself to go over and pick up another box so he wouldn't immediately snap back at Rijj. The smuggler's arguments had been heard often -- and loudly -- on Corellia. Corran, whose father and grandfather had both preceded him into CorSec, had long believed that CorSec could do the most good by keeping the Imps out of its solar system security problems. If Corellia could take care of itself and set itself up as a neutral party in this civil war, the citizens of Corellia would benefit.

While that position made perfect sense, and was defensible, it was also a position made at the top of a very slick slope. CorSec's directors had already forced the local divisions to accept Imperial Intelligence Liaison officers to monitor and coordinate operations with Imperial Garrisons. Kirtan Loor, the liaison officer his division

had been saddled with, had proved thoroughly arrogant and barely functional. He and Corran did not get along at all.

Corran hefted another box. "I think, from CorSec's view, they have a hard time telling the Rebels apart from honest criminals like me. I don't, but that's because I've got the right perspective. The Rebs aren't honest criminals at all."

Maranne smiled. "'Honest' criminals?"

"Yeah, honest. I know that what I'm doing violates the law, but I do it because that's what I do. I take the risks, I make some money, or I get sent to Kessel. It's all very straight forward." Corran placed his box on top of the first one he'd set down. "The Rebels, they do everything I would do, but they say they are entitled to do it because the law is wrong and the Empire is wrong. They're really just making excuses for their actions so they can feel they're noble when they're really no better than I am."

"What an interesting perspective."

Corran spun at the sound of the faintly echoed voice. Jodo Kast stood in the cargo hatchway, blocking most of the view of the clocking bay. Corran ducked and dodged his head to try and see past the bounty hunter, but with no success. "Where's Hal?"

"I would expect, right now, he is very nearly at Zekka Thyne's fortress."

"What?" Rij's shout of surprise filled the cargo hold. "You were there to protect them. What happened?"

Kast stepped into the cargo hold, then leaned rather casually against the bay's internal bulkhead. "Thyne's people were waiting for Trell and the other two. There were seven of them -- including the Brommstaad Mercenaries. I waited until they'd headed off east, then I returned here."

Corran slammed a fist down on top of a sleight box. "East is where Thyne has his little palace."

Kast nodded. "Hence my assumption about their destination."

"And you did nothing to stop them?" Corran jabbed a finger in Kast's direction. "You're some hot bounty hunter in this Mandalorian armor who can shoot the blaster from a man's hand while sitting down, and you didn't stop them?"

"There were seven of them and only one of me. I already did the math for you on that match-up -- I might have gotten them, but they would have killed your people."

Rij shook his head. "Rathe could have taken his share of them." Maranne nodded. "Trell would have been good for at least one."

"And Hal could have popped a couple..."

"A couple wouldn't have done it."

"...Or more, if he'd been given a chance." Corran looked from Rij and Maranne to the bounty hunter. "Are all three of you so naive you don't know what's going to happen to our people? Thyne's going to ask them about their connection to Crisk and, if they know as little as you do, he's going to have to work real hard to get answers he trusts. I'm not too wild about him going at Hal like that."

Kast shrugged his shoulders. "You can always find yourself another partner."

"If you think I'm going to abandon Hal, I'm going to have to shuck you out of that armor and beat some sense into you."

Kast's head came up as he moved away from the wall, silently emphasizing just how much bigger than Corran he truly was. "Hardly the reaction I'd expect from two criminal associates. Out of proportion, really. You're acting as if there is a closer bond between you."

Corran gave Kast as cold a glare as he could. He did resemble his father a bit, around the eyes and through the face, but otherwise he was a compromise between his mother and father. She'd been tiny and had the bluest eyes Corran could ever remember having seen. His green eyes were a midpoint between her eyes and his father's hazel eyes, as his brown hair was a match between her blond and his father's once black hair. Even his height formed a bridge between that of his mother and father.

"It wouldn't matter if Hal was my clone -- he's my *partner*, which means I'm responsible for him." Corran jabbed a thumb back against his breastbone. "I actually understand what that sort of responsibility means, Kast, and what it means is that I'm not going to leave Hal to Thyne's untender mercies."

Kast folded his arms across his armored chest. "You'd dare take on a Black Sun crime lord?"

Maranne paled. "Thyne is Black Sun?"

"Claw-picked by Prince Xizor, if the rumors are true." Corran leaned on one of the green boxes. "He's crazy-cruel and wholly nasty, but he does operate with a profit motive in mind. This cargo may have been for Crisk, but we could offer it to Thyne and ransom our people."

"I don't think so." Kast produced a datacard from a pouch on his belt and flipped it over to Maranne. "That card has the location and time for a new meeting with Crisk. Deliver the cargo there, then come back here and prepare to take off."

Maranne caught the card. "We're not going anywhere if Haber isn't here."

"I know." Kast gave her a quick nod. "It's my intention to head out to Thyne's fortress and secure the release of your friends."

Corran barked out a sharp laugh. "You balk at taking on seven guttersharks, but you'll free our friends from Thyne's fortress all by yourself? Better check that math, Kast."

"The odds are substantial, but I anticipate success."

"Yeah, well, this is Corellia, and Corellians have no use for odds. I think I'd trust in your success if I was along to enhance it."

"I work alone."

"Ha!" Corran jerked his head toward Rij and Maranne. "You work with them, you can work with me." Corran shook his fists out. "Save us both some trouble and just say yes now."

Kast hesitated and silence stole over the cargo bay. The mercenary studied Corran and even though he could not see Kast's eyes, he could feel the man's hard stare raking him up and down. Corran forced himself to look at the helmet's black slit, inviting a challenge and ready to react to Kast's next move.

The bounty hunter's arms slowly unfolded. "I will go find us a landspeeder."

"Good." Corran realized, as he replied, that he'd been holding his breath. *Hal's going to go crazy when he hears what I did. Facing down a bounty hunter like Kast. It had to be done, but it could have been done better. I'd never run away from a fight with a guy like that, but there's no virtue in picking one, either.*

Darkness swallowed Kast's form, then Corran turned and looked at the other two. "You're in way over your heads, aren't you?"

Rij shrugged. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I don't like Rathe being captured by a Black Sun crime lord."

"Well, Borbor Crisk isn't much better. We're caught in the arena between two Cyborrean battledogs. Neither of these guys plays well with others, as you've seen."

Maranne brandished the datacard. "What are we going to do? We're supposed to meet with Crisk and give him this stuff."

"The first thing we do is find out what this stuff is." Corran looked at the seals on the boxes already loaded on the landspeeder's bed. "Good, here's one that's junked. See if you can find another."

Rij started looking at new boxes while Corran fished in his pocket for a small hydrosponder. "This ought to do the trick."

Maranne came over and frowned. "What do you mean the box is junked?"

"Not the box, the seal-tab used to bind the duraplast strips." Corran pointed to the round tab that connected the crisscrossing straps. "See how the hologram imbedded in it doesn't fully line up. Look at it from the angle here. The corona on the suns here don't match up."

"I found another one," Rijj announced.

"Good, bring it over." Corran hooked the edge of the spanner under the lip of the seal. "When they don't set up right you can pop them apart with a little shove and a twist." He lifted up, then twisted his wrist.

The seal popped apart, freeing the strips that secured the box. "Get both parts and we can reseal this thing once we've peeked at what's inside."

Maranne bent to recover both halves of the seal while Corran attacked the other one. It came apart easily, then he reversed the spanner and used a flat-bladed attachment to pry the box's lid up. "By the Emperor's black heart!"

Even before the lid came up fully Corran caught the sharp sour scent of spice. The box held seven single-kilogram bricks that had been wrapped up in heavy cello-plast. They'd been dipped in a waxy coating to seal them, but the job had been done hastily. One of the packets had split open and spilled a low-grade spice compound inside the box.

"What is that?"

Corran looked at Maranne. "You're joking, right?"

"Like I said, I'm a trader, not a smuggler."

"This is spice. It's a really lousy grade of glitterstim -- the real stuff is crystalline, long fine fibers, not a powder like this. Dose up with this and you get really happy, at least really happy until you need more and the craving flows through your veins like plasma. Not a pretty thing."

Rijj curled a lip distastefully. "You know from experience?"

"Just hearsay, and watching a guy try to sell a lung to get more glit."

"Sell a lung?" Maranne shivered.

Corran shrugged. "Wasn't his. Belonged to some passerby. Like I said, not good stuff."

Rijj pried the lid off the second *sleight* box. "Sithspawn!" He reached a hand in and withdrew a crystal spike the thickness of his thumb and a good hand-span in length. Purple filled the stone's core, running from light at either end to dark in the middle. As Rijj held the stone up the light it trapped filled it with orange, yellow and red lightning bolts. All three of them fell silent in response to the brilliant display.

Corran stared at the stone, then shook his head. "Is that a Durindfire gem?"

"I think so." Rijj's voice-box bounced up and down as he swallowed hard. "My father bought a ring with a Durindfire for my mother on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Wasn't until the thirtieth that he had the debt paid off, and that was just a *little* stone.

"Not too many of those stones make it off Tatooine, and very seldom unworked like that finger there." Maranne took it from Rijj and weighed it in her hands. "This would be enough to buy us a new ship.

Rijj turned. "Let's find out what else is in these other boxes."

"No, stop." Corran held his hands up. "We don't have time enough to check them out. Put the stone back, we'll reseal these two boxes and set them in the landspeeder's front seat."



Maranne reluctantly returned the stone to its box. "What do you have in mind?"

"Look, we're going to need some insurance here if we're going to get off Corellia in one piece. We can reseal these boxes and no one will ever know they've been tampered with. You'll take those two boxes to Crisk and let him know you have, what, 198 more for him. He won't make a move against you until he has them."

Riij frowned. "He can come here and take them from us."

"Yeah, but they won't be here. We load the rest onto the speeder and take them to a storage facility." Corran frowned as if thinking hard about something. "Okay, I have it. There's a Dewback Storage Warehouse on the main road back into the center of Coronet City. You can rent a storage shed there and dump the other boxes. You go to your meeting and let Crisk know you'll give him the location of the other boxes when you're certain your friends are safe. Kast and I will go off to see Thyne and if we're not back in due time, you use Crisk to try to effect a rescue."

Maranne slowly shook her head. "I don't like the sound of this."

"Look, we've got a veritable fortune in those boxes. If Crisk doesn't want to help you, set up a meeting with Thyne and ransom us."

"How do we get in touch with Thyne?"

Corran smiled. "You did that back at your first stop on Treasure Ship row, remember?"

"Right."

"Okay, let's get loading." Corran resealed the first box and then the second. "I know you don't like the way this is going, Maranne, but you're the one who said she's a trader. If things go badly, you're going to have to trade for our freedom and, speaking for myself, I hope you strike a super bargain in the process."

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Colonel Maximilian Veers glanced down at the chair offered to him, but refrained from sitting. "Thank you for your kindness, Agent Loor, but I do not anticipate being here very long. You have looked at the message I had sent over to you."

The long, slender man sat forward in his chair, a motion that nearly tossed him sprawling up over the top of his desk. Loor caught himself with his hands, then brushed the lank of dark hair that had fallen over his face back into place. Veers felt certain the man wore his hair the way he did to accentuate his resemblance to the late Grand Moff Tarkin. *I served under Tarkin. Anyone who would think this Loor is at all similar to Tarkin should realize the similarity goes no deeper than the skin.*

"Something wrong with the springs on your chair, Agent Loor?"

The liaison officer snarled. "I have saboteurs who delight in finding ways to annoy me, and adjusting the chair is their latest form of expression."

He reached over and hit a button on his desktop datapad. "And yes, Colonel Veers, I studied the message you sent over, as requested. I can't comment on its accuracy beyond saying it is true that Zekka Thyne maintains a little fortress east of Coronet City."

"I already know that, Loor."

Loor's head came up. "You do? I wasn't aware that Thyne's headquarters would have been something you studied, Colonel Veers. I was unaware the Imperial Armed Forces had been given cause to consider Black Sun facilities potential targets."

Veers' nostrils flared. The only thing he hated more than having to deal with arrogant intelligence agents was turning a blind eye to the activities of the Black Sun. He assumed the Emperor's tolerance for the criminal cartel was based on reason, but Veers thought that tolerance was truly a detriment to the Empire. Allowing *any* outlaws undermined the rule of authority. If people could see Black Sun as somehow more malevolent than the Rebellion, then they could justify joining the Rebellion all that more easily.

"It is incumbent upon me, Agent Loor, to view any stronghold that is filled with armed individuals as a potential target. In this case I am told that Thyne is meeting with elements of the Rebel underground."

"Yes, but I am uncomfortable with your source. Who is it?"

"You saw the verification code. It is valid." Veers frowned heavily. "There is no reason to distrust the information. It is accurate and I plan to act on it."

"So you mean you don't know who your source is?"

"I don't need to know."

With a superior smile slithering over his face, Loor eased himself back in his chair. Veers hoped it would overbalance and spill him to the floor. "If you believe in this intelligence source, why come to me?"

Veers restrained himself from reaching out and slapping Loor. "I came to you, Agent Loor, because you are the Imperial Liaison Officer and you liaise with the Corellian Security Force in this administrative sector. I want to know if they have any operatives working in or around Thyne."

"Are you looking to use their extraction as a pretense for your attack, or were you worried I would lodge a protest over collateral damage?"

Veers narrowed his eyes. "There is no reason for good people to die."

Loor shrugged lazily. "If they do die, they die heroes. If you get me Zekka Thyne, you can be a hero, too."

"I believe, Agent Loor, I can find my own way to be a hero." Veers spun on his heel and stalked from the office. *With Imperials like you, Loor, I often wonder why the Rebellion has not yet succeeded in overthrowing the Empire. If things are left in the hands of people like you, can the Empire possibly survive?*

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Corran took one look at the SoroSuub X-34 landspeeder Kast was piloting and sighed. "Buy or borrow?"

The bounty hunter looked up at him from behind the wheel. "Does it matter?"

"If I'm going to get arrested for traveling in a stolen landspeeder, I'd kind of been hoping it would be something newer and sportier, like an XP-38."

"You can always walk, Corran."

"Good point." With his left hand on the windscreen, Corran hopped up and into the passenger seat. "Punch it."

Kast spun the landspeeder's wheel, fed power to the repulsorlift coils and eased the throttle forward. "How did the loading go?"

"Loading? It went fine." Corran shifted around in the cramped seat. "They should be ready to make their rendezvous."

"Good."

Corran heard the correct emphasis and inflection given to the word, but somehow he thought Kast was being something less than genuine in his response. Corran tried to put his finger on it but couldn't, and that bothered him. In the past he'd had an almost sixth sense about hardcases like Kast, but he didn't seem to be able to read the armored mercenary. *The fact that my father has been captured by a man who will fillet him is destroying my concentration.*

Kast piloted the landspeeder in toward the center of town. The bright lights and raucous sounds of Coronet City and Treasure Ship Row all started to press in on Corran. As a member of CorSec he saw Dirdock -- CorSec slang for Treasure Ship Row -- as a dangerous place. While the fringes might not be that bad -- and plenty of respectful folks dabbled in minor transgressions at some of the flashier places -- there were locations there where even Darth Vader would fear to tread. Most of those establishments were controlled by Black Sun.

Corran's grandfather had lamented the changes in the criminal class since the rise of the Empire. Rostek Horn had been in CorSec back in the days of Moff Fliry Vorru, back when flouting the law had been an art. In those days, Corran had been told, criminals only made war on criminals. The abduction of Hal and Trell never would have been tolerated back then -- civilians would have to get involved with criminal activities a lot more deeply before they were considered fair game.

Then Prince Xizor and his Black Sun organization had come to the fore. Xizor had betrayed Vorru to the Emperor, in one step eliminating Vorru and gaining favor with the Emperor. Xizor had used Corellia as training ground for some of his lieutenants. The most recent and most brutal of them was Zekka Thyne.

Corran glanced out of the landspeeder as the Dewback storage facility flashed past. As he turned to look back in the direction they were traveling, he caught Kast watching him. "Something the matter?"

"You seemed to find something interesting out there."

"Yeah, I did." *Think, Corran, think of something good.* "It was the street art on the walls."

"Art? You think the defacement of buildings is art?"

Corran shrugged. "It's not the work of Venthan Chassu but it beats peeling Star Destroyer-white for holding my interest."

Kast studied Corran for a second or two. "How does someone like you know the work of Venthan Chassu?"

"I could lie to you and tell you that my mother used to take me to museums, but you'd see through that." Corran forced himself to stare straight forward as he abandoned the truth and started fashioning a lie from a wild tale a thief he'd once collared had started spinning for him. "I knew a guy who said he had a client who would buy anything in the fine arts from Corellia. He said he'd already lifted and sold a handful of paintings, some sculpture and a couple of holographic dioramas. The client seemed impressed, but wanted more. He was spending credits like they were made of free-floating hydrogen atoms, so this guy said he wanted to plan a heist to hit the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art. He wanted me in on the crew, so I cased the place."

Kast nodded slowly. "Who was the client?"

"Don't know. My man talked to a broker, then he got tractored by CorSec and caught a shuttle to Akrit'tar. He died there."

"So what did you think of Chassu's work?"

Corran frowned. *Why would a bounty hunter care about art and rare what I thought about art?* "It was interesting. The Selonian nude studies were what I liked the best -- but not because they were nudes. Selonians have fur, so can they ever really be nude? And if it were nude Selonians I wanted," Corran held his hands up above the windscreen, "I could find plenty of them here in Treasure Ship Row."

"Why did you like them?"

"Chassu caught the two essential elements of Selonians: their sensual, sinewy forms and, because their faces were always obscured, their desire for privacy." Corran shrugged. "Some of his other work was fine."

"What did you think of *Palpatine Triumphant*?"

"The throne being built of bones gave me nightmares." Corran shivered, knowing the nightmares had not come from the skulls and shattered bones, but the homicidally gleeful expression of joy on the Emperor's face. "As a final masterpiece it does the job, but I would have liked to see him return to Selonian studies."

"His loss was a pity." Kast's helmet turned toward him. "There would appear to be more to you than meets the eye."

"Oh?"

"Indeed. The last time Chassu's Selonian nudes were on display at the Fine Arts museum was ten years ago."

Corran covered his surprise with a smile. "Not exactly. New Year's Day, two years ago, they were displayed for a private reception for Museum patrons. Four hours, ten thousand credits per person." Corran tapped Kast on the shoulder of his armor. "You would have loved it, but you'd have had to get a new paint job on the armor first."

"And you were there."

"I was." *So was Hal. My mother had volunteered with the museum for so long that when it came to hiring additional security for the reception, the administration brought us on board.* "I'll let you know when they throw another of those get-togethers, if you want."



"Please. I'll have to see if I can obtain an invitation to it."

Corran laughed. "If you can do *that*, perhaps you *can* get us an invitation to visit Zekka Thyne. How are you planning to get us in there?"

Kast's voice echoed from within his helmet. "I thought I would appeal to Thyne's sense of justice."

"You'd have an easier time finding the *Katana* fleet." Corran shook his head. "Zekka Thyne is a human-alien mongrel with big blue blots all over his pink-white flesh. His eyes are blood red except for black diamond pupils that are outlined in gold. He's got sharp ears, sharper teeth and the sharpest sense of retribution you've ever run into this side of a Wookiee bearing a grudge. I heard he shot a spice courier because the courier told Thyne she'd borrowed credits from a payoff, but had already repaid the momentary loan, with interest."

"What would Thyne have done had the woman not told him?"

"Killed her more slowly. He's a real artist with a vibroblade." Corran frowned heavily. "What Patches lacks in brains he makes up for in feral viciousness. What would you charge to kill him?" Kast's head came up just a centimeter or two. "Are you asking me to murder him?"

Corran hesitated for a second. "No, I guess I'm not. I was just wondering. I thought maybe if I did it I could consider the amount you'd get paid as some sort of charitable deduction on my taxes. If I paid any, that is."

"I would not be averse to seeing Thyne eliminated, but that is outside the purview of my immediate task." Kast looked over at him. "I believe, however, I can get us in to see him. I think the diplomatic approach would be best."

"I agree. I prefer diplomacy." Corran tapped the blaster holstered beneath his left armpit. "I'm also ready in case we have to be undiplomatic."

"Which means?"

"Which means I go low, you go high."

Kast nodded solemnly. "That shall be our backup plan, then."

The bounty hunter piloted the landspeeder with ease through the darkened hills outside Coronet City. Thyne's estate had once belonged to a shipping magnate who was arrested and sent to Kessel for smuggling spice. Thyne had obtained the deed at auction, after which rumors started through the Corellian underworld suggesting Thyne had provided the evidence that got the magnate convicted. Corran always suspected that bit of subterfuge had actually been planned and executed by Prince Xizor, since Thyne had not since shown himself to be that clever.

As they crested the last hill and came down into the broad valley in which the estate had been built, Corran pointed at the main building. "It doesn't look like much, but those rolling hills serve as great revetments and channel an assault force in toward areas where he has mines in place. Up in the towers he's supposed to have E-webs capable of sweeping any soldiers off the grounds. Thyne is even supposed to have a bolthole ready to let him get safely away if trouble starts, which isn't likely. Double-thick walls, double-paned transparisteel windows, complete electronic sensoringsystems and forty to fifty blaster-boys make this a pretty tough nut to crack. I've heard CorSec has an open warrant to search the place, but without the Imp garrison to back them up, no one is stupid enough to try to deliver it."

"You weren't joking about the sensors." Kast directed the landspeeder toward two men coming out of a side entrance, catching them in the glow of the ridelamps, then turned the speeder to the left and let it settle to the ground. "I'll go speak with them. You be ready in case things go badly."

"You'll give me a sign?" Corran watched the bounty hunter unfold himself from the driver seat and mentally catalogued the weapons he could see. "Dumb question. If they fall I'll come running."

He watched Kast approach the two men. The bounty hunter held his hands open and out away from his sides, but not up in any sign that could be taken as surrender. *He wants them to know he doesn't intend to kill them, but that he's capable of doing just that given sufficient provocation.* The trio met and Corran could hear the buzz of voices, but could make out no words. One of Thyne's men spoke into a comlink, then Kast raised his left hand and beckoned Corran forward with a casual flutter of fingers.

Corran left the landspeeder and approached the three men, aping Kast's open-handed posture while doing so. One of Thyne's men came toward him, clearly intent on taking his blaster, but Corran frowned at him. *What, you think I'm stupid enough to try to shoot my way in and out of here?*

The blaster-boy hesitated, then sunk his hands into his pockets. The other Black Sun hireling pointed at Corran. "Go ahead, take his blaster."

"You think he's stupid enough to try to shoot his way in and out of here?" The first gunman shook his head. "Let's take them to the boss. We don't want to keep him waiting."

"True. Follow us."

Their guides conducted them to the main entrance and into a foyer that Corran thought might have once rivaled that of the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art for splendor. Rose granite and black marble had been inset into the floor in a complex and chaotic pattern. A stone staircase spiraled up to the second and third floors, and drew the eyes upward to the holographic representation of the night sky above them. Small alcoves in the walls housed statuary and huge goldenrod wall panels provided ample space for the display of a vast array of paintings and original holographic works of art.

*It's amazing how something that could have been so beautiful can so easily be made so... vulgar.* It seemed as if Thyne's definition of art was intimately wrapped up with the concepts of nudity, excess and a color scheme that relied heavily on pinks, purples and an irritatingly vibrant shade of green. Some of the statuary -- what little of it actually could have found a home in the Museum of Fine Arts -- had been garishly *corrected* by application of this color scheme, with excess paint having spilled down the walls. The paintings showed Corran a view of models he thought more appropriate for xenobiological textbooks and the holographs seemed the visual equivalent of a high-pitched scream.

"How much were you going to offer me to kill him?" Kast whispered.

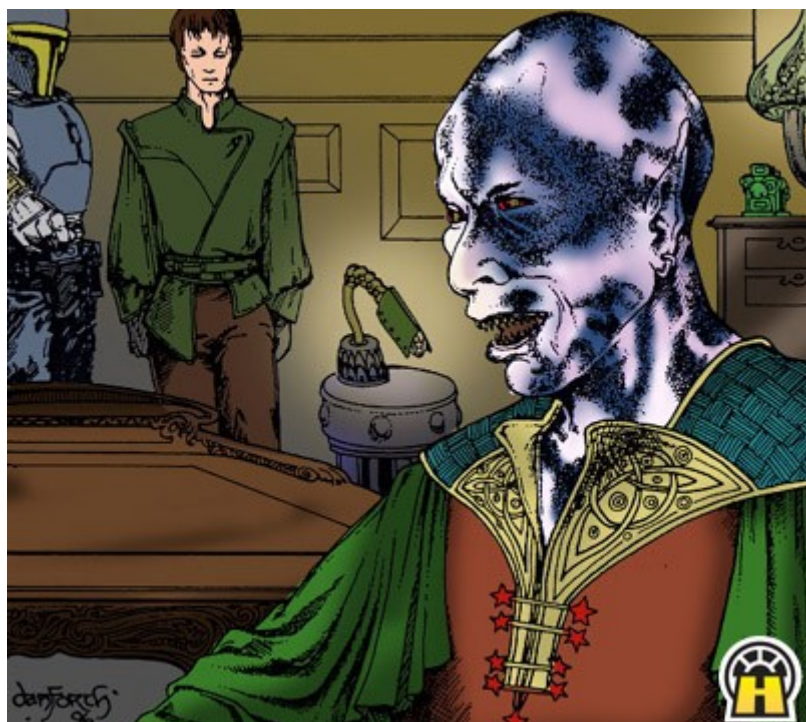
"Not enough."

They followed their guides through the foyer and a huge set of double doors into Thyne's office. Here the clash of artworks had a new element added to it: a war between style of furnishings. Thyne's desk had been carved from deep brown *vweliu* tree wood and was in itself a work of art. Surrounding it were other pressed-form duraplast and fiberplast chairs and tables -- the sort of things that could be left out in a glen because weather would not hurt them. A few stainless steel tables topped with transparisteel sheets completed the decor and a riot of lamps -- no two matching -- provided illumination for it all.

Corran looked over at Hal and caught a brave nod from him despite the twin lines of blood dripping down from his nose. Haber Trell looked in worse shape, with a rapidly swelling eye and an inert vibroblade stuck into the seat of his chair between his thighs. The Tunroth's yellow flesh had greyed up a bit, and a dollop of bluish blood trickled from one nostril, but Rathe otherwise looked alert.

Zekka Thyne smiled at Kast and Corran found the expression nothing short of obscene. "Ah, Jodo Kast, finally we meet. Normally I do not retain an individual I have not met, but your reputation precedes you. I decided the credits were well spent." Thyne's scarlet gaze sharpened. "Don't disappoint me."

"I have no intention of doing so." With a swift, smooth motion, Kast drew a blaster in his right hand and jammed the muzzle against Corran's left temple. "Haber Trell and the Tunroth are assassins who were hired by Borbor Crisk to eliminate you.



Their partners are even now arranging for Crisk to fill a couple hundred *sleight* boxes with the price for your head."

"That's not true!" Haber Trell snarled angrily. "He's lying."

Thyne silenced him with a backhanded slap. "So who are these other two?"

Kast grunted what almost seemed to be a laugh. "They hired these two locals to help them get around and as camouflage. With these two in tow, who would think they are galaxy-class assassins?"

Corran started to raise a hand to massage his head, but Kast kept the gun pressed hard against his skull. Corran wasn't certain which hurt more: his head or his pride at having been fooled by Kast. *He played me very well, just like he played the rest of us. Better I was in my father's place because Kast never would have fooled him.*

Corran glanced sidelong at Kast, then nodded toward Thyne. "You know, you really can't trust the word of a bounty hunter."

"True, but I am more willing to trust him than some assassin's local fetch-and-carry."

Kast reached over and relieved Corran of his blaster, then lowered his own gun. "My story is fairly easy to check out. You should dispatch some of your people to the Mynock's Haven. It is the cantina where Trell's partners are meeting within the hour with Crisk to finalize the payoff details. You'll find the *sleight* boxes at the Dewback storage yard near the spaceport. You can send other of your people there and wait for Crisk and his men to come and fill the boxes."

Corran rubbed at his temple. "You figured that out from my look at the place? You're good."

"That's why people retain me." Kast looked over at Thyne. "I take it you have detention cells here?"

"Wine cellar is empty. You can put them in alcoves down there."

"Good. I shall do that while you prepare the ambush for Crisk." Kast motioned with his blaster for Corran to head toward the door.

"Once your people report back, you'll know who you can trust."

"Yes." Thyne hissed the word. "And those who are lying will pay the ultimate price for daring to deceive me."